

## Defence of Cultural Relativism

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**Abstract.** I attempt to rebut the following standard objections against cultural relativism: 1. It is self-defeating for a cultural relativist to take the principle of tolerance as absolute; 2. There are universal moral rules, contrary to what cultural relativism claims; 3. If cultural relativism were true, Hitler's genocidal actions would be right, social reformers would be wrong to go against their own culture, moral progress would be impossible, and an atrocious crime could be made moral by forming a culture which approves of it; 4. Cultural relativism is silent about how large a group must be in order to be a culture, and which culture we should follow when we belong to two cultures with conflicting moralities.

**Keywords:** Pojman, cultural relativism, cultural absolutism, theory of relativity

### INTRODUCTION

There are diverse cultures around the world. Most Americans eat beef whereas most Indians do not. Female circumcision is prevalent in some countries of Africa but is viewed as a deplorable custom in most other countries. The death penalty was abolished in Germany but is retained in China. Recreational use of marijuana is legal in the Netherlands but illegal in Korea. In Tibet, a dead body is neither buried nor cremated but is thrown to vultures to eat. Doctor-assisted suicide is regarded as moral in Switzerland but immoral in Korea. Polygamy is an acceptable form of marriage in Saudi Arabia but not in China. The list of such different moralities in the world can be extended ad nauseam.

What are we to make of the different moralities around the world? A cultural absolutist and a cultural relativist have different answers to this question. The debate between them is interesting in its own right, but it also has grave implications for our daily lives. If cultural absolutism is

true, either eating beef or abstaining from beef is right, which means that they cannot both be right. If cultural relativism is true, however, they might both be right. In this paper, I will expound cultural absolutism and relativism, making use of Harman's comparison (2008) of moral relativism with Einstein's theory of relativity. I will then defend cultural relativism from the brilliant criticisms by Thomson (1990), Pojman (2008), Satris (2008), Rachels and Rachels (2010), and Schick and Vaughn (2010). In my view, none of these standard objections against cultural relativism are successful, and cultural relativism is a more plausible moral theory than cultural absolutism. Hopefully, this paper places cultural relativism in higher repute in the philosophy community.

### CULTURAL ABSOLUTISM AND RELATIVISM

Cultural absolutism maintains that an action is moral or immoral by an absolutely right standard. The fundamental difference between a moral act and an immoral act is that the former meets the absolutely right standard whereas the latter does not. An absolutely right standard transcends all cultures in the world, so an action might be right even if all the cultures disapprove of it, and it might be wrong even if all the cultures approve of it. Moreover, one culture might be considered to be morally better than another, depending on whether or not its moral standards adhere more closely to the absolutely right standard than those of its competitor. For example, a beef-eating culture would be morally superior to a beef-abstaining culture if the former were closer to the absolutely right standard than the latter.

In contrast, cultural relativism holds that a moral agent's behaviour is to be evaluated in reference to a culture. If his culture accepts it, it is moral. If his culture rejects it, it is immoral. For example, it is moral to eat beef in relation to a beef-eating culture, but wrong in relation to a beef-abstaining culture. Thus, cultural approval is what makes an act right, and cultural disapproval is what makes an act wrong: "Cultural relativism, then, is the doctrine that what makes an action right is that it's approved by one's culture" (Schick and Vaughn, 2010: 354). "The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then, that action *is* right, at least within that society" (Rachels and Rachels, 2010: 16).

Cultural relativism also asserts that it is impossible to morally adjudicate between different cultures. A culture would be better than another if it were closer to the absolutely right standard than the other were, but there is no such thing as an absolutely right standard, so no culture can be better than another: “There is no single true morality. There are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others” (Harman, 2008: 11). “There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society’s code as better than another’s” (Rachels and Rachels, 2010: 16).

A beef-eating culture, for example, is no better than a beef-abstaining culture, and vice versa, so the latter should not accuse the former of eating beef, and the former should not denigrate the latter for refraining from eating beef. Consequently, they ought to tolerate each other’s practices and they are justified in keeping their different customs without interfering with one another.

As far as I know, Harman (2008) elaborates moral relativism at the most sophisticated level. He compares it with Einstein’s theory of relativity:

Earlier, I compared moral relativism with Einstein’s theory of relativity in physics, which says that physical magnitudes, like mass, length, or temporal duration, are relative to a frame of reference, so that two events that are simultaneous with respect to one frame of reference can fail to be simultaneous with respect to another (Harman, 2008: 11).

Imagine that a driver and a passenger are in a car, and the car travels at 50km/h with respect to the ground. In such a situation, the driver also moves at 50km/h in relation to the ground, but he is at rest in relation to the passenger. Notice that the driver is in motion or at rest depending on what the frame of reference is. If it is the ground, he is in motion, but if it is the passenger, he is at rest. Furthermore, there is no fact of the matter as to which frame of reference is better. It is false that the ground is a better frame of reference than the passenger and vice versa. Harman says that the same is true of morality. Morality is relative to a moral framework. An action that is moral with respect to a moral framework might be immoral with respect to another. No moral framework is better than another.

## OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

1. Principle of Tolerance. Now that the content of cultural relativism is clear, it is time to turn to objections to it. Recall that cultural relativism claims that we ought to tolerate the members of other cultures. Opponents of cultural relativism argue that it is self-defeating for a cultural relativist to take the principle of tolerance as absolute: “Herskovits seems to be treating the *principle of tolerance* as the one exception to his relativism. He seems to be treating it as an absolute moral principle” (Pojman, 2008: 17). “But to explicitly advocate cultural relativism on the grounds that it promotes tolerance is to implicitly assume that tolerance is an absolute value” (Schick and Vaughn, 2010: 354).

In other words, a faithful cultural relativist should contend that the principle of tolerance is also relative to culture, i.e. a tolerant act might be right in relation to one culture but wrong in relation to another.

In the light of the critique above, a cultural relativist can revise his position as follows. The principle of tolerance is also relative to a culture, so a tolerant act is moral in reference to a culture which agrees with it but is immoral in reference to another which disagrees with it. This new version of cultural relativism still enshrines the assertions that morality is relative to a culture and that no culture is better than another. Yet it is purged of the internal inconsistency that the critics above attribute to the old version of cultural relativism. Moreover, it allows for a situation where all cultures around the world include the principle of tolerance within their moral codes. In such a situation, a tolerant act would be moral in each culture and everyone in the world would be morally obligated to tolerate members of other cultures. Thus, the cultural relativist does not have to require that the principle of tolerance be absolute.

2. Universal Moral Rules. In the ethics literature, both cultural relativists and absolutists agree that cultural relativism is incompatible with the existence of universal moral rules. In order to defend moral relativism, for example, Harman claims that it is unlikely that universally accepted moral principles exist: “It is unlikely that any nontrivial moral principles are universally accepted in all societies” (Harman, 2008: 6). With the view to refuting cultural relativism, Thomson (1990) and Schick and Vaughn (2010) argue that there are universal moral rules. Their

examples are as follows: “One ought not to torture babies to death for fun” (Thomson, 1990: 20). “Equals should be treated equally is not the only self-evident moral truth. Another is: Unnecessary suffering is wrong” (Schick and Vaughn, 2010: 365).

These moral rules are so intuitively appealing that violating them seems to result in an immoral act, whichever culture you may live in. Consequently, they are universal, and hence they are counterexamples to cultural relativism.

Contrary to the moral relativists and absolutists above, I believe that the existence of universal moral rules is not a strike against cultural relativism. Recall that cultural relativism claims that an act is right or wrong with respect to a culture and that no culture is better than another. None of these claims are undercut by the existence of the so-called universal moral rules. For the cultural relativist, a moral rule is universal not because it is in line with an absolutely right standard that transcends all cultures but because it is in line with all the cultures in the world. Cultural relativism does not have to preclude the possibility that all the cultures in the world jointly endorse some moral rules. To put it differently, cultural relativism is compatible with the existence of an intersection among different cultures. Suppose that the intersection includes the moral rule that one ought not to torture babies to death for fun. Then, if a Korean or an American tortures a baby to death, it would be immoral because it is prohibited by their respective cultures, not because it does not match up with an absolutely right standard. It follows that cultural relativism does not have to require that no moral principle be universal.

3. Hitler Was Right. Pojman runs a *reductio ad absurdum* against cultural relativism, viz., on the cultural relativist’s account, Hitler’s genocidal actions are just as morally praiseworthy as Mother Teresa’s sacrificial actions: “Adolf Hitler’s genocidal actions, so long as they are culturally accepted, are as morally legitimate as Mother Teresa’s works of mercy” (Pojman, 2008: 17). Hitler’s heinous acts were accepted by the Nazi culture, so cultural relativism entails that they were moral. Our intuition, however, tells us that they were immoral. Therefore, cultural relativism is false.

Despite Pojman’s foregoing objection, a cultural relativist would stand his ground, saying that Hitler’s acts were moral with respect to the Nazi culture and Mother Teresa’s acts were moral with respect to non-Nazi

culture. Hitler's acts sound immoral to us because our intuition is influenced by non-Nazi culture, which we are implicitly using as the moral framework to evaluate his acts. We also make a spontaneous judgment that non-Nazi culture is better than the Nazi culture because our intuition is laden with non-Nazi culture, and we are tacitly employing it as the standard to assess the Nazi culture. Members of the Nazi culture would reject our judgment because their intuition is predisposed to favour their own culture and they are unconsciously using it in appraising non-Nazi culture.

Furthermore, if Hitler had been a cultural relativist, he would not have attacked Jews in the first place because he would have believed that the German culture was no more correct than the Jewish culture. Moreover, his atrocious actions conform well to a cultural absolutist's possible belief that the German culture was superior to the Jewish culture. It is not clear to me whether it is cultural relativism or absolutism that has more dangerous implications for our daily lives. In any event, cultural relativism has a theoretical resource to say that Hitler should not have massacred Jews. Cultural relativism, *pave* Pojman, does not have the absurd deductive consequence that Hitler's heinous crimes were moral.

4. Social Reformers Are Wrong. Some philosophers claim that cultural relativism leads to an unsavoury consequence that social reformers are always wrong to oppose a socially accepted practice: "Social reformers couldn't claim that a socially approved practice is wrong because if society approves of it, it must be right" (Schick and Vaughn, 2010: 354). "... reformers are always (morally) wrong since they go against the tide of cultural standards. For example, William Wilberforce was wrong in the eighteenth century to oppose slavery" (Pojman, 2000: 17). It sounds convincing to us, however, that slavery was a deplorable practice and that the social reformers were right to challenge it. Since cultural relativism says otherwise, it is false.

A cultural relativist would reply that the social reformers were indeed wrong to oppose slavery, but he would add that they were wrong with respect to the past culture and they were right with respect to the present culture. We instantaneously assent to the view that the reformers were right because our intuition is influenced by the present culture, and we employ it to determine whether the social reformers were right or wrong. We would have had the opposite intuition, that the social reformers were wrong, if we had lived in the past culture where slavery was taken for

granted and if we had used the past culture as a framework for our moral judgment.

Let me add that if the masters had been cultural relativists they would not have enslaved black people in the first place because they would have believed that their culture was no better than the black culture. The white people's act of enslaving the black people meshes well with a cultural absolutist's possible belief that the white culture is superior to the black culture. Again, it is not clear whether it is cultural relativism or absolutism that has a more hazardous impact on our daily lives. In any event, cultural relativism is compatible with the desideratum that the whites should not have enslaved the blacks, and it does not have the unsettling deductive consequence that social reformers are wrong to oppose certain cultures.

5. No Moral Progress. Let us compare the past culture, where there were slaves, with the present culture, where there are no slaves. According to cultural relativism, there is no such thing as an absolutely right standard, so the present culture is neither better nor worse than the past culture. If that is true, however, there would be no such thing as moral progress: "To say that we have made progress implies that present-day society is better – just the sort of transcultural judgment that Cultural Relativism forbids" (Rachels and Rachels, 2010: 20). We strongly believe, however, that culture and morality have progressed, i.e. the present culture is more correct than the past culture. Therefore, we should reject cultural relativism.

A cultural relativist would admit that we have moved toward equality as a result of the abolition of slavery, but he would deny that we have moved toward an absolutely right standard. We may think that we are now closer to an absolutely right standard because equality is of absolute value. When we think so, however, we are using the present culture, which approves of equality, as our moral frame of reference. If we use the past culture, which disapproved of equality, as our moral frame of reference, we would have an opposite intuition that we are now farther from the absolutely right standard, and hence we made moral regress rather than progress.

The foregoing defence of cultural relativism can be reinforced by the reflection on the relativity of motion. Suppose that we measured the velocity of a car with respect to the ground. One day, we stopped using the ground and started using the passenger as the frame of reference.

Does it follow that we are closer to the absolute frame of reference than before? The answer is no, given that there is no such thing as an absolute frame of reference. Similarly, given that there is no such thing as an absolutely right standard, from the fact that we moved toward equality it does not follow that we moved toward an absolutely right standard, or that we made moral progress.

6. Any Act can be Made Moral. Pojman argues that cultural relativism has the disturbing consequence that even a flagrant crime can be made moral by conjuring up a culture which accepts it: “Bundy would be morally pure in raping and killing innocents simply by virtue of forming a little coterie” (Pojman, 2008: 18). Forming such a culture, however, does not make raping and killing innocents moral. Since cultural relativism says otherwise, it is false.

A cultural relativist would cheerfully grant that any act can be made moral by forming a culture that approves of it. His position may appear to be preposterous but on close examination it is not. Let us go back to the relativity of motion. A car is travelling at 50km/h with respect to the ground. As long as you invoke the right frame of reference, the car can be said to be travelling at any speed you like. For example, it can be said to be moving at 30km/h, if you pick as a frame of reference a bicycle travelling at 20km/h with respect to the ground in the same direction. Regarding the same car, you can say that it is moving at 50km/h, 30km/h, etc. You can choose whatever velocity you like. You are right about the velocity of the car, insofar as you appeal to the right frame of reference. The same is true of morality. You are right about the morality of a certain action inasmuch as you invoke a culture which commends it. For example, you can say that murder is right, but add that the action is assessed under the criminal culture which praises murder.

Moreover, cultural relativism implies that Bundy, a notorious serial killer, should have tolerated his innocent victims. After all, they belonged to a non-criminal culture, and they were morally flawless with respect to their own culture. Bundy had no legitimate reason to interfere with their lives. Thus, at first sight, cultural relativism appears to license crimes by saying that they are moral with respect to the criminal culture, as Pojman claims. On close investigation, however, cultural relativism has a theoretical resource to discourage crimes. It is false that a cultural relativist is inevitably committed to the position that a capital crime is right.



7. Vague Concept. Recall that cultural relativism holds that morality is relative to a culture. Pojman objects that we cannot precisely define the concept of culture that figures in the formulation of cultural relativism: How large must the group be in order to be a legitimate subculture or society? (Pojman, 2008: 18). Since it is not clear how many members are required for a culture or a society to serve as a moral framework, cultural relativism is conceptually flawed.

In order to confront Pojman's criticism above, a cultural relativist could conjure up again the relativity of motion. We can group a tree, a road sign and a rock together, and say that a car is travelling at 50km/h in relation to that group of objects. How many objects are required in order for the group to serve as a frame of reference? The answer is obvious. Any number of objects will do. Even a million objects can constitute a single frame of reference. The same is true of morality. Any number of people can constitute a culture. In conclusion, there is no conceptual problem with cultural relativism.

Moreover, Pojman's foregoing objection, if legitimate, backfires on cultural absolutism and his other objection against cultural relativism. Recall that cultural absolutism says that there is an absolutely right standard transcending all "cultures". Note that the concept of culture also figures in the formulation of cultural absolutism. A cultural absolutist is faced with a similar challenge: How large must a group be in order to constitute a culture that is transcended by the absolutely right culture? Also, as discussed in a foregoing section, Pojman objects that social reformers are always wrong to go against their own culture if cultural relativism were true. How large must a group be in order to constitute a culture that the reformers oppose? Thus, Pojman's criticism against cultural relativism fares no better than cultural relativism itself vis-à-vis the problem he raises against it.

8. Belonging to Two Cultures. Pojman notes that a person may belong to different cultures at the same time, and that they may have conflicting moral codes. In such a situation, his act can be both right and wrong: "Relativism would seem to tell us that where he is a member of societies with conflicting moralities he must be judged both wrong and not-wrong whatever he does" (Pojman, 2008: 18).

Suppose, for example, that Mary is an American citizen and a Christian and that she had an abortion. The American law condones it but Christianity prohibits it. According to cultural relativism, Mary's

abortion is both right and wrong, but it is impossible for an act to be both right and wrong.

A cultural relativist would again ask us to reflect upon the relativity of motion. Suppose that a car is in motion with respect to the ground. In such a situation, the driver is both in motion and at rest. At first glance, a contradiction is committed, but the contradiction dissolves once we make the frames of reference explicit. The driver is in motion with respect to the ground but is at rest with respect to the passenger. The same is true of morality. At first sight, it is a contradiction that Mary's abortion is both moral and immoral, but this seeming contradiction dissolves once we exhibit the cultures by which Mary's abortion is judged. Mary's abortion is moral in relation to the American culture but is immoral in relation to the Christian culture. Thus, cultural relativism is not undermined by the fact that an agent belongs to different cultures with contradictory moral codes.

Which culture should Mary choose when she contemplates whether to have an abortion or not? Critics argue that cultural relativism is silent on this issue: "Relativism seems to provide no way to get a handle on the kind of uncertainty that a person may have in choosing between the ways of his church, his family, his friends, his countries, etc." (Satris, 2008: 23). "Each of us is a member of many different cultures, and there is no way to determine which one is our true culture" (Schick and Vaughn: 2010: 354).

It is not clear which culture we should choose and what would be the grounds for our choice. Therefore, cultural relativism is an incomplete theory of morality.

In response, a cultural relativist would again ask us to imagine that a car is travelling at 50km/h with respect to the ground but is at rest with respect to the passenger. Of the ground and the passenger, which object should we choose as a frame of reference? The answer is obvious. We can choose whatever object we like as long as it suits our need. If we are interested in how long it will take for the driver to reach his destination, it is appropriate to choose the ground as the frame of reference. In other situations, we may choose the passenger or other moving cars on the road. Let us apply this point to Mary's situation. If Mary is interested in her future as a Christian, she can choose Christianity as her frame of reference. If she is interested in her future as an American, she may choose the American culture as her frame of reference. In short, our

interest determines which culture we choose as a standard when we appraise human conduct.

9. Argument for Cultural Relativism. Ockham's Razor favours cultural relativism over absolutism. Recall that cultural absolutism claims that an absolutely right standard exists and that an act is moral or immoral independently of all the cultures around the world. Cultural relativism denies the existence of such a standard, claiming that all acts are right or wrong only in reference to cultures. It follows that the ontology of cultural relativism is simpler than that of cultural absolutism. Also, cultural absolutism has no better explanatory power than cultural relativism. It is not the case that cultural absolutism explains more phenomena than cultural absolutism. Recall that the existence of some universal moral rules can be explained not only by cultural absolutism but also by cultural relativism. Thus, the principle of economy dictates that we ought to settle for cultural relativism over absolutism.

The principle of economy was also what motivated physicists to discard the notion of absolute space. Absolute space is purported to be an entity which is at absolute rest. It is the absolute standard by which a material object is in absolute motion. For example, if a material object moves at 50km/h in relation to absolute space, its absolute velocity is 50km/h. A problem is that absolute space is imperceptible, so it is impossible to measure the absolute velocity of a material object. All we can measure is, at best, the relative velocity – the velocity of a material object in relation to another material object. For this reason, physicists thought that it was otiose to postulate the existence of absolute space. Perhaps ethicists should also rid ethics of the notion of an absolutely right standard.

## CONCLUSION

Cultural relativism is not held in as high esteem as utilitarianism and Kantianism in the ethics literature. Most philosophers do not regard cultural relativism as being a viable doctrine in ethics. Introductory ethics texts dismiss it as being hopelessly flawed after introducing some criticisms against it. For this reason, a cultural relativist has the burden of diffusing the criticisms. In this paper, I attempted to rebut them all. In my view, they are all surmountable and cultural relativism is a better

ethical theory than cultural absolutism. Cultural relativism is feasible and worthy of philosophers' re-examination.

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